

GROWING UP WITH US™...

A Newsletter For Those Who Care For Children

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©POPULATION-SPECIFIC THERAPEUTIC PLAY

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Behavioral Objectives: After reading this newsletter the learner will be able to:

1. Discuss the benefits of play in the hospital.
2. Discuss 4 examples of therapeutic play that the healthcare provider can include in the hospitalized child's care.

Play is at the very center of a child's life. It is the "work" of children. The need to play is an essential activity for children's physical health and psychological development. From the earliest age, playing helps children to learn, to relate to other people and to have fun.

We might think that when children are ill, they neither have the strength nor the inclination to play. Or, that the hospital is not the most suitable place to play or that as they have to stay in bed, they will not be able to play as they normally do. Or, that the priority is medical treatment and physical needs, rather than emotional and psychological ones. But nothing could be further from the truth.

This newsletter will discuss play in the hospital. Therapeutic play, including creative expression, diversional activities and dramatic play, will be examined, as well as implications for the healthcare provider.

PLAY IN THE HOSPITAL

When children are hospitalized, they are at their most vulnerable. Boredom, loss of control, separation anxiety, regression and fear of pain and bodily mutilation are common reactions of children to illness and hospitalization. The hospital is an environment in which play becomes more necessary than ever.



Many institutions have very elaborate and well-organized play areas and programs under the direction of child-life specialists. Other facilities have limited facilities. A playroom, a designated area for play, allows children to temporarily, physically distance themselves from the frightening environment of the medical setting. They can work through their feelings in a non-threatening, comfortable atmosphere and in the manner most natural for them. The boundaries of the playroom must be maintained as safe. That is, free from receiving medications, as well as intrusive or painful procedures, seeing strange faces and being asked probing questions. However, no matter what the facility provides for children, healthcare providers can still include play activities as part of the child's care.

BENEFITS OF PLAY:

Hospitalized children are not only ill, but they are also separated from normal routines and activities, as well as from their family, friends and familiar surroundings. Play helps children feel more secure and lessens the stress of separation and feelings of homesickness. Additionally, play also helps children maintain a sense of control over the strange, unfamiliar environment of the hospital. Play can also, simply, be recreational, helping the older child combat boredom. Since illness and hospitalization often involve overwhelming stresses, including pain and fear of bodily mutilation, playing out fears and anxieties gives the child a means to cope with these stresses. It also provides an outlet for feelings of anger and frustration, as well as creates an environment where stress and anxiety are reduced.



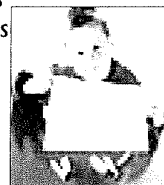
Engaging in play activities puts children in charge, removing them from the usual passive role of recipients of a constant stream of "things" being done to them. Play offers the child the much needed opportunity to make choices, in an environment where most decisions are made for the child.

Incorporating play in the child's care aids in gaining the child's cooperation during assessment, diagnosis and procedures. Through play children can also learn the information they need to understand hospital procedures, treatments and their illness.

THERAPEUTIC PLAY:

Creative Expression:

Drawing and painting are excellent activities for children to express themselves. Children are more at ease expressing their thoughts and feelings through art. They only need to be supplied with materials, such as paper, as well as crayons, finger paint and/or acrylic or water color paint and brushes. Children usually require little direction about what to draw. In the hospital setting, asking the child to draw a what they like or do not like about the hospital, is often very therapeutic, as well as informational. Such drawings assist the healthcare provider identify and help the child cope with their concerns or fears. The healthcare provider can use drawings as a springboard for discussion of the child's thoughts, fears and understanding of procedures. Depending on the age of the child, what the child has drawn may be unrecognizable. Asking the child, "Tell me about your drawing" is more helpful than guessing and possibly misinterpreting what the child is trying to express.



Puppets are universally effective for communication with children. Most children view them as peers and readily communicate with them. Children will tell the puppet feelings they hesitate to express to adults. Puppets dressed to represent figures in the child's environment, such as a doctor, nurse, child, lab technician, and members of the child's family, are especially useful. Simple puppets can be made out of paper towels. Place some cotton balls in the center of the towel and wrap a rubber band under the cotton to form a "head". The index finger controls the head, the thumb and other fingers are the arms and the draped cloth is the body. The head can be decorated, with the help of the child, to represent whoever the child desires.

Diversion:

Almost any form of play can be used for diversion, but the activity and toys should be selected based on the child's age, developmental level, interests and condition. Diversional activities, focusing children's attention on something enjoyable, helps gain cooperation during a procedure or treatment, as well as is an effective non-pharmacologic method of managing pain. Additionally, age-appropriate activities also minimize children's reaction to hospitalization, specifically loss of control and boredom. The stimulus provided by playing with toys undoubtedly helps to improve children's quality of life during their hospitalization.

Dramatic Play:

Dramatic play allows the child to reenact frightening or puzzling hospital experiences. Through the use of a doll or stuffed animal, as well as replicas of hospital equipment, including an empty syringe and IV tubing, blood pressure cuff and stethoscope, children can play out the situations that are part of their hospital experience. It also allows them to manipulate and become familiar with equipment used on them. Additionally, dramatic play allows children to learn about procedures and events that will concern them and to assume the role of healthcare providers in the hospital. For example, a child can help apply a dressing to the abdomen of his or her stuffed animal, in preparation for abdominal surgery.



AGE-APPROPRIATE DIVERSIONAL ACTIVITIES

INFANTS:

- Talk or sing to the infant in a soft voice
- Play a music box, jack-in-the-box, musical mobiles, placed 18" away
- Give baby sticky tape to manipulate
- Play pee-a-boo or pat-a-cake
- Involve parents to divert and comfort baby
- Toys—likes rattles, squeaky toys, cloth or vinyl books

TODDLER:

- Play a game, such as asking child to point to different body parts—"Where's your nose"; "Where's your mouth?"
- Read to child, letting child turn pages, usually several at a time. If the child needs to drink fluids, play a game—"In order for us to read the next page, you take a sip."
- Permit child to "help, such as holding tape or alcohol pad
- Toys—push-pull, play telephones, balls, finger paints, books, thick crayons and paper, puzzles with large pieces.

PRESCHOOLER:

- Ask child to name colors of various items
- Have child tell a story about a favorite experience—likes to talk about themselves.
- Tap into child's imagination—A child who is post-op, who is reluctant to take a deep breath, may cooperate if asked to pretend to blow out candles on a birthday cake. Or, "For your x-ray you'll need to stand straight like a statue. Let's practice".
- Play "Simon Says" with child—"Simon says take a deep breath"; "Simon says, blow the cotton ball around with this straw."
- Sing simple songs or nursery rhymes with the child— "Twinkle, twinkle little star".
- Toys—dolls, stuffed toys, trucks, doctor and nurse kits, books, jigsaw puzzles, easy construction sets, simple games, such as Candyland®, Old Maid®

SCHOOL-AGE:

- Have the child count aloud, forwards and/or backwards
- Ask the child the name the days of the week and/or month
- Encourage the child to talk about school and activities
- Ask child to talk about "hero" and any collections he or she may have
- Ask child to tell you a joke, rhyme or riddle
- Allow child to help plan own daily routine
- Ask child, who is on oral medication, if he or she would like to collect medicine cups
- Encourage communication with friends, such as writing letters to classmates
- Toys—video or board games, such as Clue® or Yahtzee®, puzzles—jigsaw and

Preparing children for procedures decreases their anxiety, thus promoting their cooperation. Children often develop fantasies or distorted ideas in the absence of accurate information. Allowing the children to see and perform what will be done to them, before it is, helps the child learn what to expect.

Dramatic play is also useful in allowing the child to ventilate feelings following a procedure. For example, if a child receives an injection, the child, with a needless, empty syringe, can do to a doll what was done to him or her. It is not uncommon for the child to repeatedly "stick" the doll, forcefully, while saying, "It hurts doesn't it?!"

During times of stress, such as hospitalization or medical treatments, play can provide a safe and familiar outlet for a child's emotions. This helps the child cope more positively with the experience while promoting normal development. Healthcare providers play an essential role in incorporating play in the care of children of all ages.



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